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THE USE OF FAIRY TALES

(Extracts from Felix Adler, in "The Moral Education of Children," International Education Series.)

" . . . This species of literature can be divided broadly into two classes—one consisting of tales which ought to be rejected because they are really harmful, . . . the other of tales which have a most beautiful and elevating effect, and which we cannot possibly afford to leave unutilized.

"The chief pedagogic value they possess is that they exercise and cultivate the imagination. Now, the imagination is a most powerful auxiliary in the development of the mind and will.

"The familiar anecdote related of Marie Antoinette, who is said to have asked why the people did not eat cake when she was told that they were in want of bread, indicates a deficiency of imagination. . . . Much of the selfishness of the world is due, not to actual hard-heartedness, but to a similar lack of imaginative power. It is difficult for the happy to realize the needs of the miserable. Did they realize those needs, they would in many cases be melted to pity and roused to help. The faculty of putting one's self in the place of others is therefore of great, though indirect, service to the cause of morality, and this faculty may be cultivated by means of fairy tales.

"As they follow intently the progress of the story, the young listeners are constantly called upon to place themselves in situations in which they have never been, to imagine trials, dangers, and difficulties such as they have never experienced, to reproduce in themselves, for instance, such feelings as that of being alone in the wide world, of being separated from father's and mother's love, . . . etc. Thus their sympathy in a variety of forms is aroused.

"In the next place, fairy tales stimulate the idealizing tendency. What were life worth without ideals? . . . Thus faith itself cannot abide unless supported by a vivid idealism. . . .

"In speaking of fairy tales I have in mind chiefly the German Märchen. . . . The Märchen are more than mere tales of helpful fairies. They have, as is well known, a mythological background. . . . They come to us from a time when the world was young. They represent the childhood of mankind, and it is for this reason that they never fail to appeal to children. The Märchen have a subtle flavor all their own. They are pervaded by the poetry of forest life, are full of the sense of mystery and awe, which is apt to overcome one on penetrating deeper and deeper into the woods, away from human habitations. . . . But per-

haps their chief attraction is due to their representing the child as living in brotherly fellowship with nature and all creatures. Trees, flowers, animals, wild and tame, even the stars, are represented as the comrades of children. . . . The child still lives in unbroken communion with the whole of nature; the harmony between its own life and the enveloping life has not yet been disturbed, and it is this harmony of the human with the natural world that reflects itself in the atmosphere of the Märchen and makes them so admirably suited to satisfy the heart of childhood.

“ . . . My first counsel is: Tell the story; do not only give it to the child to read. There is an obvious practical reason for this. Children are able to benefit by hearing fairy tales before they can read. But that is not the only reason. It is the childhood of the race, as we have seen, that speaks in the fairy story to the child of to-day. It is the voice of an ancient, far-off past that echoes from the lips of the storyteller. The words ‘once upon a time’ open up a vague retrospect into the past, and the child gets its first indistinct notions of history in this way. . . . The child as it listens to the Märchen looks up with wide-open eyes to the face of the person who tells the story, and thrills responsive as the touch of the earlier life of the race thus falls upon its own. Such an effect, of course, cannot be produced by cold type. Tradition is a living thing, and should use the living voice as its vehicle.

“ My second counsel is also of a practical nature, and, I make bold to say, quite essential to the successful use of the stories. Do not take the moral plum out of the fairy-tale pudding, but let the child enjoy it as a whole. Do not make the story taper towards a single point, the moral point. You will squeeze all the juice out of it if you try. Do not subordinate the purely fanciful and naturalistic elements of the story, such as the love of mystery, the passion for roving, the sense of fellowship with the animal world, in order to fix attention solely on the moral element. On the contrary, you will get the best moral effect by proceeding in exactly the opposite way. Treat the moral element as an incident; emphasize it, indeed, but incidentally.

“ How often does it happen that, having set out on a journey with a distinct object in mind, something occurs on the way which we had not foreseen, but which in the end leaves the deepest impression on the mind. The object which we had in view is long forgotten, but the incident which happened by the way is remembered for years after. So the moral lesson of the Märchen will not be less sure because gained incidentally. . . .”

